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Gloria and the Prostitute

Mickey was young when Birmingham took her under its wing. The city showed her how to seek out the pavement for work, for sleep, for whatever she needed. She was wanted by the city, when the threat of German bombs troubled the citizens with fear; and what better way to escape fear than by pleasure. She started living off her fur coat at 15, sliding it down one shoulder at a time to any man who could afford to see it.

“You’re a bit young, aren’t you?” a man once said, grabbing her by the hips and hoisting them towards his pelvis.

Mickey’s curves arrived early on in adolescence, giving her an air of maturity and confidence that no other girl her age could quite match. But out on the pavement, the customers and the old timers could smell her new blood. She didn’t like being seen as inexperienced.

“Would you prefer me saggy and old?” she replied.

The man laughed and began caressing and kissing her.

Leaving home so young was easy for Mickey. Growing up, she watched her parents gaze adoringly at each other across the supper table, sparing no looks for her. Mickey felt their partiality. She wished to have a sibling, to know she was seen as more than something that must be tolerated.

Six months earlier, the Germans bombed the Carlton cinema where her father was watching *Typhoon*. He survived, but suffered internal bleeding and emotional trauma that only allowed him to lay lifeless in bed at home. Her mother was his sole caretaker, and Mickey found there was no use in her presence.

“I’ve got a mate in the city that has a job and a room for me,” she said to her mother.

Her mother nodded apathetically.

“Strip the bed before you leave,” she said.

Mickey couldn't tell if she knew it was a lie. But if she did, she didn't mind. So neither did Mickey.

The Brands owned a fish and chip shop down on Bristol Street that Mickey frequented for their crispy potatoes and oversized portions of fish. After her first personal encounter with the family, Mickey quickly realized their daughter Gloria never lied.

Right before closing in the middle of a tumultuous rainstorm, Mickey stumbled in to see if she could snag a basket before the night crowd arrived. Mr. Brand took her 10 pence and sat her down with two baskets; one of fish and one of chips.

“It's good you come in, these chips would've gone to waste,” he said with a smiling Polish accent.

Mickey sat and ate while a young girl intentionally swept around her. She finished both baskets so quickly her face turned red from embarrassment. Mrs. Brand, a larger woman in a stained cream apron left the fryer behind the cash register and sat down next to her.

“Where are you sleeping tonight, dear?” she asked sweetly, in an accent similar to the man's.

Mickey pulled at her wet tights to conceal the holes and compose herself.

“I always find a place,” she said with a smile. A smile she had perfected to put people at ease, or whatever else she wanted them to feel. Mrs. Brand looked back at Mr. Brand and yelled something at him in Polish. He nodded.

“No, no, you'll stay with us. Gloria,” she called to the young girl who was now down in the cellar. “Prepare a bed for our guest.”

“Another?” the girl groaned as she ran up the stairs. “Mother, she could be a thief for all we know!”

“Gloria!”

“Thank you, but I really couldn’t—”

“Just for the night. No one needs to be out in that rain,” Mrs. Brand said. She hadn’t even asked for Mickey’s name yet. Her eyes were a muddy brown, not particularly beautiful or comforting. But she agreed, and was given an old nightgown to sleep in.

“Follow me,” Gloria said. She begrudgingly brought Mickey in through a door in the shop and down the stairs into the cellar. The floor was cold under Mickey’s bare feet, but not the same kind of cold as the pavement; somehow, it was warmer.

The rain continued for a week. Mickey was never asked to leave, so she accepted their implied invitation to stay. She woke up every morning in the downstairs cellar of the shop in the same way. There were no windows, but at around five every morning, Mickey would be stirred awake from a dream to the sound of Gloria stomping down the stairs with heavy pockets of jingling coins. Gloria’s boots dragged and scuffed across the entire parquet floor of the shop, which was only about ten feet in length, but sounded like a mile. The first few days of her stay, Mickey mentioned nothing of the noise to Gloria. But by the fourth morning, she was feeling her charm and confidence rise again. Mickey dressed and tip toed up the stairs to the shop, waiting for Gloria. When she returned, she had bags and bags of what Mickey could only guess was cod from the stench.

“Where’ve you been now, Gloria? The sun’s only just rising,” Mickey said.

“If you want the best catch from the market,” she said, “you get up with the sun.”

“That’s a quite big job for only a wee girl!”

“I’m nearly thirteen. And I can’t trust that my mother or father will wake up early enough to do the job properly.”

“Why wouldn’t they?” Mickey asked.

“I’m not a child. If I don’t pick up the slack, no one else will,” Gloria replied.

“They seem capable to me?” Mickey said.

“What a brilliant observation after being here five minutes. Move, I need to put the fish away,” Gloria said.

“I admire how dependable you are for only being ‘nearly thirteen’,” Mickey said.

Gloria looked up from the icebox but said nothing.

“Maybe sometime I’ll come with you? I’d love to learn your secrets.”

“I wouldn’t count on it,” Gloria said and leapt up the stairs, landing softly on the balls of her feet.

There was no sweet talk with Gloria. Her frosty words amplified the cold April air seeping through the cement wall, mingling with the smell of yesterday’s cod and almost stale potatoes. The spring of 1942 was really more of an extended winter, with chilly rains and winds enveloping each day with more gloom. The cellar room was smaller than the shop itself, which only holds about ten small round black tables and mismatched chairs. The floors of the shop were scratched from customers rocking back and forth, boys dragging them across the shop to sit with the pretty girl from their class. Sacks of potatoes and newspapers line the perimeter of the cellar, with a makeshift bed of a few old cushions and a sheet in the center. A single light bulb dangled from the ceiling, enough light crept in through the crack in the door that Mickey could read the papers at her leisure. She spent most days upstairs in the shop with Mr. and Mrs. Brand,

peeling potatoes while Gloria was at school, and most nights outside the shop, doing her own work.

Gloria was a small girl, smaller than Mickey was at twelve. She had no sign of a bust, short, jagged brown hair that was always covered by some sort of *schmata*, as her mother called it. Mickey had heard the word tossed around by her own mother, but she never said anything about the connection. Gloria had eyes that made it hard to believe she was such a crass little girl. The rims of her irises were a dark speckled blue, with light grey and blue filling in the rest. It was the first thing you noticed about her, but their beauty quickly dissipated once she opened her mouth.

Mrs. Brand didn't ask where Mickey was from or what she did when she left the shop at night, but they talked often over the potatoes. She told her about Poland, cooking, and Gloria.

"She's the most wonderful tap dancer. "When she puts those shoes on, you'd never recognize the girl. Smiles, lipstick, the works."

Mickey laughed at the image of Gloria, the girl who woke up with a scowl, as a tap dancer. She'd already been staying with the Brands for a few weeks and she'd yet to see any evidence that Gloria wasn't just an old, grouchy woman trapped in the body of a twelve year old. But, Mickey made it her mission to show Gloria she needed her as an older sister to teach her how to be a child.

When Gloria came home from school that day, she came straight over to see the progress Mickey had made with the potatoes.

"That's all you've done in this time?" she said.

"Your mother told me you're a tap dancer. Can you show me a number?" Mickey teased.

“Yes, yes, Gloria, show us!” said Mrs. Brand.

Gloria stared at Mickey, horrified and irate.

“I am not here for your entertainment! Customers will be coming soon, hurry up with these potatoes!”

“Don’t be so uptight. Let me see a little smile and dance,” Mickey said, poking her cheek.

“Don’t you ever touch me. You’re just a dirty stranger!”

“Gloria! Mickey is our guest,” said Mrs. Brand.

“We don’t know her, mother. What were you even doing before you met us? Why don’t you have a job? We work hard for what we have, what have you ever worked for?”

“Enough!” Mrs. Brand screamed, and pulled Gloria by the ear upstairs to the flat.

Mickey sat with a half peeled potato in her hand. Gloria’s words were cruel, but not as destructive as Gloria likely believed them to be. Mickey’s parents never acknowledged her, never glorified her with any sort of conversation. But Gloria put energy into Mickey, even if it was always negative. It was hard to understand Gloria’s cruelty, but she believed if she could get Gloria talking enough, she would eventually warm up to her. Mickey thought of this logical as she continued peeling until all the potatoes for the day were finished.

Gloria slumped down the stairs in a pair of dirty trousers and an oversized jumper, wiping her nose with the end of her sleeve. She sat next to Mickey with a cutting board and a large bowl, and began slicing the potatoes into chips.

“Sorry for what I said.”

“I’m sure your mother made you say that. But thank you,” Mickey replied.

Gloria continued with her knife in silence.

“Shouldn’t you be doing schoolwork? You’re only twelve, you don’t have to do everything for the shop,” Mickey said.

“I’m nearly thirteen, remember? And I don’t have to work as much as I do. But mother and father don’t understand what it is to own a business. They need me.”

“Have they ever said that to you?” Mickey said.

“No. They’re too darling to realize.”

The Brands were darling. Mr. Brand was a smidge shorter than Mickey, with a rounded belly and a small patch of hair missing from the top of his head. His eyes were almost the same as Gloria’s but less grey. Mrs. Brand was less round but shorter than Mr. Brand, with a head of tight auburn curls. They were both very calm parents and shop owners. If something went wrong, or a customer hadn’t enough money to pay, Mr. Brand would brush it off with an easy smile and sometimes a fib.

Gloria never lied. When Mr. Brand is too generous with the portions, she was the first one to adjust them accordingly. But after closing each night, all four of them would sit down for dinner and Gloria praised her for her great cooking for the day. She would even crack a smile occasionally when Mr. Brand told a joke, even though he forgot several of the words in the punch line. Mickey felt happy on the rare occasions she saw Gloria smile. When it wasn’t raining too hard, Mickey would excuse herself out for a night walk, and worked for a few hours while the Brands slept soundly and unsuspecting.

After dinner one night, Mrs. Brand suggested Gloria go with Mickey on her evening walk.

“The rain’s finally stopped. Go enjoy, we’ll clean up,” she said.

Gloria and Mickey both sat for a moment in hesitation. But then, in the moment where Gloria would normally have pitched a fit, she stood up and got her coat from upstairs. Mickey was stunned, and looked at Mr. and Mrs. Brand.

“Go, before she changes her mind,” Mrs. Brand said. Mr. Brand winked at her and she too put her coat on and the two left.

Gloria was quiet for many paces. It was strange for Mickey, to be so close to Gloria and not to hear her barking orders. She relished in her silence, and the ability to walk freely on the pavement without forcefully slapping a smile on her face for oncoming customers. After enough time to clear her mind, Mickey tried her luck at cracking Gloria again.

“So, I’m not the first person your parents have boarded. Tell me about the others,” she said.

Gloria was looking out onto the street, and took her a few moments to process the question.

“Usually stray soldiers or homeless people,” she replied.

“Do you hate everybody who comes to stay or is it just me?” Mickey said.

“I didn’t hate you for long,” she said.

Mickey paused.

“Hard to believe that,” she said.

“I didn’t, really. But my parents spoil the people they bring in. It’s not fair to let them get comfortable when they eventually have to go.”

“Your parents aren’t spoiling people, they’re just being kind, Gloria.”

“Isn’t honesty kind enough?”

Mickey shook her head, but laughed. That was Gloria, how she defined what was honest and what wasn't.

"It's not always agreeable to be honest. Don't your friends get upset with you if you're always honest?"

Gloria took another long pause before she answered. "There aren't many people to upset with my honesty."

Mickey thought about what Gloria did on the weekends, taking extra up slack in the shop, running around the city for more errands. But everything was always done alone.

"I'm sure plenty of people would love to be bothered by you," Mickey said, linking her arm in Gloria's.

Gloria giggled, and surprisingly didn't retract her arm. After some heavy convincing, Gloria told Mickey about her tap dancing. She was in a vaudeville type group that performed mostly during the holidays.

"You should see a show. Wow, all the lights and costumes. It's really snazzy," she said.

"Christmas is still six months away! Surely you won't want to see me again," Mickey said.

"I wouldn't mind terribly," Gloria said.

Mickey didn't hear Gloria's response. She began to make out familiar faces of ladies she worked with hanging around beneath a streetlamp.

"I think I felt a raindrop. Let's go home," Mickey said.

"I don't feel anything?" Gloria said.

Arms linked still, Mickey swung Gloria around so they were back in the direction of the shop.

Gloria became tamer to Mickey after that walk. She was still the captain of the ship, but her commands had sweeter intonations. She even started walking down the steps a bit more carefully. Mickey still woke up, but more pleasantly, quickly drifting back off to sleep.

Every Friday night the Brands held a Shabbat dinner in their flat. Sometimes they would invite other families to come, but it was mostly just the family and Mickey. Mrs. Brand made chicken soup with whatever scraps of the bird she could bargain at butcher for. Shabbat dinner was the one day of the week when Gloria didn't cause a raucous over anything. As soon as she was home from school, Mickey and Gloria began the dough for the *challah*. Gloria showed Mickey how to section and braid the bread. They both sat by the oven, opening up the door to peak at their slowly rising creation, only to be yelled at by Mrs. Brand.

"It won't rise if you won't leave it be!"

When the sun set, Mrs. Brand brought out two silver candlesticks and two white candles.

"I'll go get the *schmatas* for our heads," said Mickey.

"You remembered the word!" Gloria said.

Mrs. Brand's *schmata* was a fine lace cloth. She lit the candles and stretched her hands out in front of the flames, circling them three times, and covered her eyes to pray silently. Mickey closed her eyes as well, trying to recall the few words she remember hearing sometimes as a child. *Baruch atah adonai* is all she could retrieve. She was too embarrassed to ask Gloria still, so she stood, with her eyes closed, reflecting on her week. All were silent until Mrs. Brand finished her prayers. Mr. and Mrs. Brand kissed, said Shabbat shalom, and then Mr. Brand put his hands over Gloria's head and recited a prayer. Mickey heard the names he mumbled, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah. Gloria touched Mickey's head, and she bowed her head.

As they ate, Mickey could hear the pouring rain outside. But as they finish the meal, the clouds clear and beautiful night sky emerges. Mickey cleared the table and excused herself to the cellar to quickly change for a night of work. It had been raining too hard the past few days to make excuses to go out, so tonight was crucial for her. She wanted to give Mr. and Mrs. Brand some money for having her, but she hadn't enough yet. Mickey rouged her cheeks and lips, put on her proper dress shoes, and slipped into a once white satin dress that synched at the waist. The dress was short and her stockings still ripped. Her pale white legs were exposed through the patches left not mended in her stockings.

Gloria snuck across the shop floor and opened the door slowly, so the bell attached to the top wouldn't ring. Before she met the Brands, she would hang around close to their shop, looking for pay. Now, to be safe, she went a bit further into the city. After walking about a kilometer away from the shop, she started seeing some of the more regular girls.

"Where've you been?" one older woman asked, ash falling down her dress from the cigarette in her mouth.

"Been staying with a family. They own a fish and chip shop," she replied.

"Look at you," another girl said. "Aren't you just a little princess now?"

The girls laughed. Mickey waved and walked a bit further so she had time to herself. The night was slow, but she caught the eye of one gentleman. He pulled up to her in a dinky black car.

"How much, sweetheart?" he asked in high-pitched Birmingham accent.

"Depends," she said.

Mickey invited herself into the passenger seat and the man pulled over to park. She unzipped his pants and did two shillings worth of work. When she got out of the car, she saw the girls she had passed earlier walking her way.

“Oi,” one girl said, “you had a visitor while you were busy.”

“She looked more like a young boy,” another said.

“What did you tell her?” Mickey asked

“We said you were with a customer,” one said with a wink.

Mickey’s mind was racing. She looked and saw Gloria not too far away from her.

“Gloria!” she yelled. “Wait!”

She ran, hugging her fur coat to her chest.

Catching up to her, Mickey said, “Gloria, what are you doing here? You shouldn’t be out this late.”

“I heard you leave. I thought you were just going on a walk. What are *you* doing here?”

“I was. I just went for a walk.”

“That’s a lie. I talked to your friends. They said you were with someone.”

“They’re not my friends, Gloria.”

“Then how do they know what you were doing and I don’t?” she asked.

Gloria couldn’t find the words to even make up a lie.

“And why are you in those clothes? I’ve never seen you in them. Do mother and father know you’re out?”

Mickey sighed. “Gloria, I work here.”

“What do you mean? Where?”

“Here, where we’re standing.”

“What?”

Mickey looked over to the other women and Gloria began to realize where she was. She saw the women in their flashy clothes, playing with their dresses, pulling them up their thighs as men drove by.

Gloria started to cry. “You’re a whore. You’re my friend, how can you be a whore?”

Mickey tried to console her, but she snapped at her.

“Don’t touch me.”

“Gloria, I’m sorry. Really.”

“That’s a lie,” she said, and ran home.

Mickey knew she couldn’t return now, and luckily she hadn’t left much there. She never lied to Mr. and Mrs. Brand, but she could never say the words to their darling faces. She walked back down the block to where the other girls were, and waited for another dinky car to pass her by.

Mickey wanted so badly to return to the shop, just to see Gloria. A few times she thought about walking by when it was busy, so she could catch a glimpse of her and go unnoticed. Around Christmas she came very close, but managed to stop herself. But, she got close enough to see a flyer for the show Gloria had told her about, and decided she could go and remain respectfully invisible. Mickey couldn’t wait to see Gloria with rouged lips.

The days leading up to the performance Mickey worked into the wee hours of the morning. Finally the day came, a Sunday afternoon matinee. She got a seat in the middle of the theater, secretly hoping Gloria would see her and be happy she came. When Gloria came on stage, she looked much more grown up than when Mickey had left her. Mickey could make out

Gloria's subtle curves under her costume, and noticed she'd grown another few centimeters.

Gloria had a solo at the end of the show that made Mickey tear up, and she was not the only one to give Gloria a standing ovation. But there were few enough people that Mickey knew she could see her.

Mickey waited outside the theater for Gloria after the show. She came out, her face still full of make up. She wasn't smiling anymore. The rouge had been smeared off her lips to the corners of the mouth. Mickey gave her a hug, but she stiffly shrugged her off.

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

"You told me you wanted me to see the show. I wanted to keep my promise."

"I'm sure," Gloria said.

"You were absolutely fabulous, Gloria, a real star. I'm so thrilled I got to witness it for myself."

She sniffed and looked upwards, clearly avoiding the tears that were forming in her eyes.

"Someone else is living in the cellar now, but I saved your things that you left down there."

"Well, thank you. That's very kind," Mickey said.

"You can come back with me now and get them. Mother and father would love to see you. Only if you don't have to get back to work."

"It can wait," Mickey said.

Mickey visited with the Brands for a bit, and they invited her to eat dinner with them and the new guest they had down in her old cellar room. The new tenant was a man, older than Mickey by only a few years, but looked as if he was the same age as Mr. Brand. The war had not been kind to him. Mickey declined, and left with her things.

“Thanks for coming,” Gloria said.

Mickey nodded, walked out of the shop and down the pavement once again.

Steamed Milk

Nana knew I hated milk.
 I took it with my cereal,
 But not a lot!
 And she hardly gave me cereal anyway.
 No
 She got the good rolls from Tesco
 Sweet and toasty in the oven
 No tomato until I was older.
 Or a cholley roll with all the same.
 But hardly ever milk.
 But she should have known still the same!
 The bottle was always as full when I left as when I came!

So when we went to the park and it was cold
 Yes
 It was so cold my mittens were frozen to my hands
 And she put them in the pockets of that purple trench coat.
 I don't even believe it was warm,
 the coat,
 But it went down to the ground and she still wears it everywhere.
 So my hand went into the pocket with hers,
 But we could actually hold hands,
 You know,
 The mittens, remember?
 But we walked around
 And it looked like Central Park
 But much too grey
 So very English
 Too much for me because I was only 4.

And then came the café.
 Right in the middle of everything.
 Yeah it was cold and I had to walk with my hand in her pocket
 But I didn't want the milk!
 I swear I never asked for it!

But steamed milk would solve everything,
 I always gave your father steamed milk, she said,

He played too much football
Too much in the cold
I worked when he got sick
I had to pay for the milk,
of course.

My dad never gave me milk of any sort,
He was gone,
At his own house in his different country.
I fed myself,
Certainly no milk for me.

I wanted to think of steamed milk as good,
So we could walk home with hands in our own pockets.

She ordered it and one for herself.
And I was quiet

I sipped and the foam was
nauseating.

But I finished half of it!
And she begged me,
Please, finish the milk, Emily,
And I said Nana, let's keep walking.
So she paid with loose change

I walked with my hand in her pocket
and I don't remember if she knew how much I really hated milk,
or if the park really looked like Central Park;
had I even been there yet?

I remember the people in the park,
No other children like me,
But people everywhere,
Even in the cold grass!

The walk back to Nana's is long,
she takes out a skinny fairy cigarette,
More steamed milk for her.

The Tombs

My Uncle Hugh was nine the first time he got stabbed. It wasn't deep, but it hurt like hell. That's what Hugh says, but he says it softly, the way that people who don't curse sound when they say a swear word. Most of Hugh's memories growing up are violent, since that was the environment he was surrounded by living in a council estate. Contrary to the lavish sounding name, a council estate is the English version of the American projects.

Hugh explains his experiences slowly, often pausing to swallow, clicking his tongue in between words. They were bedtime stories I never asked to hear, the first or the second time. Hugh isn't a storyteller, but he didn't really tell me stories, he told me secrets. He reconciled his secrets into stories, and healed himself by inviting me into them. I don't know if my dad, Gary, would have believed his stories as a kid, and I don't think he does now as an adult. They slept together in a cramped room on two cots with an ocean of orange carpet slowly floating Hugh farther and farther away.

Hugh tells me they moved to the estate in 1963, a few weeks before the stabbing. Gary and Hugh went to different schools, but in the morning, Gary would stay on the bus a few extra stops to see Hugh off.

"The bus smells," Hugh whispered to Gary, "why can't father walk us to school anymore?"

"Our new schools are too far away to walk. I'd take a smelly bus over walking in the rain, wouldn't you?"

Hugh shrugged. Their father didn't move to the estate with them, but they didn't talk about it, or how much they each missed their morning walks with him. He was quiet compared to their mum, but his absence was resounding.

Before Hugh got off, Gary took a big whiff of Hugh and pinched his fingers over his
“Pee-ew!”

They both smiled and waved goodbye.

Hugh rode the bus home from school, alone, sitting quiet and small. Coming home without Gary wasn't hard; Gary was a football player and quickly befriended the other boys, running off to the pitch with them everyday as soon as school let out. Hugh met him there sometimes, but not for the football, for the stray weeds he could find along the perimeter of the field. In the spring he would search for dandelions that hadn't yet lost their yellow petals, and snack on them while Gary chased the ball back and forth.

“Your brother's eating flowers again,” the boys would say.

Gary ignored their comments.

“They're edible, Gary! Why shouldn't I eat them?” Hugh said on their walk home.

It was strange to Gary, but weeds were never strange to Hugh. He would pass by different species, wave hello and greet them by name. Gary couldn't ever recall any specifics Hugh would go on about, but it put Hugh at ease; he was always enamored by their presence.

On the days he skipped the trip to the pitch, Hugh walked by himself the few blocks from the bus stop back to the flat. He spent his time on the hunt for new weeds to add to his collection, although he rarely came across a species he couldn't already identify. But one day, growing on a sliver of grass outside just the entrance to the estate, he saw something. An enormous weed sprouted from the earth, standing at nearly half his height. The leaves were long, slender and green, with lilac flowers beginning to blossom at the top. Hugh felt the soft leaves in between his fingers, and knelt down beside it to give it a proper inspection. He gently moved the leaves down to take note of the stem, still stumped on the name of his new friend.

“You, Brand,” a boy yelled from a few meters away.

It took a moment for Hugh to look up from the weed. No one had ever called him by his last name before.

“Me?” he said.

The boy laughed and tackled Hugh to the ground. He subdued Hugh’s lashing limbs and climbed on top of him.

“What are you doing?” Hugh quavered.

The boy’s hands were the size of Hugh’s feet, if not bigger, and more powerful than all the force exerted by Hugh’s whole body.

Hugh squirmed, wriggled, and released a grunt with every kick, but the boy was too strong.

He pulled a knife out of the back of his trousers.

“Hold still.”

Hugh was sure he was going to die next to the biggest weed he’d even seen by a stranger who somehow knew his name. But Hugh kept fighting, angry and confused.

“Please, please, plea—”

“Shut it!” the boy howled and brought the knife down over Hugh’s chest.

Hugh shifted his torso just enough for the boy to miss his target. He held Hugh’s arm down and pulled the knife out. He got up to wipe the blade clean and Hugh stumbled across the estate home.

“You bloody little Jew!” the boy yelled after him.

Hugh stopped for a moment and looked back. The boy was already cleaning his knife, brushing the blade against the young lilac petals. Hugh took off again, racking his brain for the name of his new weed.

Hugh ripped open the front door in a daze. The pain of the stab wound was concealed by the sensation of blood running down his arm. He imagined some of it escaping onto the carpet and the scolding he would receive for it; not to mention the explanation he would have to conjure up. His chest tightened thinking about retelling the afternoon to anyone. Hugh ran up two stairs at a time to the bathroom, praying no drops had left his arm.

He clawed the once white shirt off over his head, now covered in red and brown. Hugh laid the shirt on the bathroom tiles, feeling the wet fabric resist the pink tiles. He ran his hands over the shirt to make it flat, too overwhelmed to realize he was just making the shirt dirtier. Hugh couldn't focus on one thing or anything, but saw there was a tear, a noticeable one, where he'd been stabbed. In his state of hysteria, it was the tear that grabbed his attention enough to make him finally sit down and get to work.

A tear he could take on. Hugh was an exceptionally decent seamstress for a nine year old. Dozens of times he watched his grandmother Helen patch up socks, shirts, or attempt to tailor Gary's old school uniforms to fit him.

"Gary's a fatty boy," Hugh said to his grandmother, "his trousers will never fit me!"

"Quit being so cheeky," Helen snapped.

Hugh would sit as she'd dive the thread through the eye of the needle, always missing the first few times, eventually licking the end and sailing it through the opening with one straight shot. That was the very hardest part for Hugh. After that it was always easy, always the same. The scissors that cut the thread from the spool, the old Yiddish song bouncing around in her

throat, trapped behind closed lips. Still, Hugh's gaze never drifted away from his grandmother's fingers. His eyes rolled up and down with the motion of the needle; it sunk beneath the foamy layer of fabric, swam up to the surface gasping for air, only to plunge back down again. His eyes felt the waves of her stitches, humming the melody of her rhythm inside his head. When she finished, she bit down on the thread, yanked at it good and hard, tied two knots and finished.

But when Hugh found himself alone with the needle and thread in his hands, he'd lost the tune of his grandmother's hum. The pink octagonal bathroom tiles melded into one pink blob through his tears. Hugh could feel the muscles of his forehead contracted to form a deep dent in the skin between his eyebrows. The thread between his fingers was soaking wet with saliva. A collection of fibers on his tongue crept down his throat with every glob of mucus he swallowed. Hugh took a dirty knuckle and wiped away enough tears to stick the drenched strand through the eye, and secure it.

Hugh inserted the needle into the left sleeve of his shirt. His fingers guided the needle up and down the sea of cotton, tightly, almost in a perfectly straight line. He could almost do it with his eyes closed now, but he wouldn't waste time. It only occurred to him then that mending the tear in the shirt would not disguise the blood and dirt that covered the rest of the fabric. But Hugh was finally done and he could deal with it later. In the fashion of his grandmother, he yanked the thread with his teeth, tied two knots, and dragged himself into the tub to wash the now dried blood off his body.

Hugh put a plaster on the deep gash and hoped it would stop the bleeding. He went to his bedroom, put on a dark jumper to mask any blood that might slip out, and crawled into bed. He didn't care to take supper that night. Instead, he lay in bed, arms wrapped around himself, crying lowly under the pastel linens.

Hugh was content living in the old flat above the family fish and chip shop. When his grandmother wasn't looking, he snuck baskets of chips out to the back of the building for him and Gary to eat while their parents worked in the garden. The garden was small but pristine; an array of flowers filled the plot, juxtaposing the smell of grease and cod with violets and roses. Their father sometimes left the flat for a few days at a time, so he was only in charge of weeds when he was around.

"I don't know why we can't keep them," Hugh's father said his mother, "they're beautiful, Gloria."

"There's no room for weeds in this garden!" Gloria said.

"I think they're perfectly sound," he said.

Whenever Hugh's father would find an unusual looking weed, he would call Hugh over to have a look. They poked at the stem and leaves together, eager to look up its classification later. The last time Hugh was in the garden, his father and him found a stout looking docks weed.

"Well don't just stare it," Gloria said, ripping it out of the ground.

"We were looking at that!" Hugh's father said.

"Just do the job you've been asked to do," Gloria said.

Hugh's father continued to leave and return to the flat after that, but the time in between his departures increased. Hugh came home one day after school to an empty flat, with Gary waiting by the doorway.

"What's happened to my toys? Who's taken all my things?" Hugh asked in a panic.

"We're moving. Mum told me to come fetch you. We get to ride on the bus together by ourselves, isn't that exciting?" Gary said.

Hugh and Gary walked to the bus stop and rode to a new part of Birmingham, not too far from the shop, but far enough that Hugh hadn't a clue where he was. They got off the bus fairly close to the city center, crossed the road, and into the council estate. Hugh had never seen a neighborhood like this before. Two cinder block columns greeted the residents on each side of the entrance to the estate. Hugh was amazed to see three, four, five towers of the tallest buildings of flats he'd ever seen scattered about the property. Porthole like windows ascended the building from the ground floor all the way to the top. Hugh counted the windows from the top of the building, ten in total, swimming down to the concrete below.

"Come on, now," Gary said, pulling Hugh along by the hand. Gary didn't talk much to Hugh, but they did hold hands when they walked together. But that was all.

When the door opened, fresh beige, red and blue, speckled carpet you welcome into the flat. A few meters away from the front door was a small kitchen, with a window that looked out onto the asphalt. A small stove stood on the white linoleum floor; four miniature gas burners, an oven that was just big enough to roast a chicken for special occasions. Much smaller than what they had at the old flat. A wooden table painted white was pushed as far away from the stove as possible, but only amounted a few feet. Four wobbly white chairs were pushed into the table, an ashtray sat at the far end next to a pair of candlesticks.

"Just in time," Helen said, entering the kitchen. "Your mother's working late, so we'll have to light candles without her."

She took out the box of Shabbat candles but stopped. Her eyebrows rose but quickly fell into a crease, as if she'd forgotten something and suddenly remembered. Then, she walked over the sink and shut the curtains to the windows above it.

"Why'd you do that?" Hugh asked.

She didn't respond. Helen knew there'd been talk at the synagogue about some incidents around the city.

"Last week I saw a lad and his mum walk past an estate," a congregant said. "The boy had a *yamaka* on, and some misfits came and stoned them both, they did."

Helen had heard of others being refused at pubs and shops, or suggested to go somewhere "more suitable for your kind". It had never been a problem for her or anyone she knew, but the Brands were new and Helen didn't know the people of the estate.

Each boy was handed a *yamaka*, and Helen put on a lace handkerchief on her head. She lit the candles, circled the flame three times with her hands, and covered her eyes in prayer. When the mumbling beneath her breath ceased, she kissed each boy on the head.

"Shabbat shalom, boys. Now, go have a look at your new room."

Up the stairs and to the right there was a small room with two cots set up about a meter away from each other. Hugh knew his bed was the one on the right because a teal quilt was laid out on the bed, the same one he slept with in the old flat. Gary's bed had a quilt too that Hugh didn't find interesting enough to pay attention to.

"I miss my old room," Hugh said to Gary.

"I'll bet you there are lots of children around," Gary said. "Let's go outside and walk around."

The boys strolled around the estate, kicking rocks and surveying the grounds. The main bit had a parking lot with long blocks of buildings lining the perimeter. Islands of cement divided the asphalt, with small saplings whimpering in the center atop a bit of grass. Each block of building had three levels. The top two were flats, linked together with an open air corridor where people sat and drank and smoked cigarettes that flew down into the grass below. The ground

level were duplexes, with stairs so narrow and steep Hugh's mother was forced to prance up each one only on the balls of her small feet so she wouldn't lose her footing and fall.

Hugh and Gary returned home to their new room. Irrelevant bland walls surrounded them, intensifying their longing for the fish and chip shop. Before, Gloria only worked at the shop with their grandmother. Now, by the time they woke up each morning, she was either getting ready for her janitor shift, or coming home from a night shift and drinking a coffee before heading into the city to another job. Hugh was often still asleep when the slight of morning light peaked in onto Gary's bed.

"Wake up, Mum's just gotten home from work. Time for breakfast," Gary whispered to Hugh, shaking him gently.

Hugh groaned and opened his eyes. Gary's face was rounder than Hugh's, but Hugh had a particularly narrow face to begin with. Gary's grey blue eyes softened the room, softened the morning enough that Hugh swung his legs onto the scratchy carpet and shuffled down the stairs to the kitchen. Two bowls of porridge and a bottle of milk were spread out on the small kitchen table.

Hugh's mom stood by the stove, slightly hunched over, with short blonde hairs pinned back behind her ears. Gloria was a short, frail looking woman with an occasionally quick tongue. Her eyes were the same as Gary's, but sunken deeper into their sockets from working three jobs. A menthol cigarette hung out of her mouth, although she never quite inhaled; she said she just liked the flavor.

She only started smoking because her clients at the hair salon would give her cigarettes as a treat. It was the end of the war and cigarettes were still being rationed in England. But Gloria wasn't a smoker. So not to be rude, she placed every cigarette on her dressing station, and lied,

saying she would smoke it later. Whispers circulated the salon that she was selling the cigarettes on the black market for extra cash. Gloria got so fed up she began to smoke just to spite them. Now hunched over the stove, she brought over a bowl of porridge for herself, menthol in her mouth and an ashtray next to her cup of tea.

“You’re enjoying that, aren’t you?” Gloria said to Gary who was inhaling his porridge so fast he couldn’t feel his tongue being burned.

“It’s great, Mum” Gary replied. Hugh shook his head, although most of his porridge remained in the bowl.

“You better be off, then, don’t want to be late,” Gloria said and took a puff. She kissed each boy on the head, and they left. Hugh sat on the bus and thought about walking home alone. He nearly asked Gary to walk with him, but couldn’t. Instead, he took Gary’s hand until he arrived at his stop.

It had been almost a month since the fight and Hugh hadn’t seen the boy anywhere. But one afternoon, there was a knock at the door. Hugh still hadn’t made any friends at school, and neither had Gary, as far as he knew. The thought of the boy made him run down the steps and look through the peephole. It wasn’t him, but it also wasn’t someone he knew.

“Who’s at the door?” his grandmother yelled from the living room.

Before he had the chance to answer, she walked up and opened the door. A lanky boy with a buzzed head stood in the doorway.

“Can Gary come play football?” the stranger asked in an older adolescent voice.

“And who might you be?” Hugh’s grandmother asked.

“Jimmy,” the boy replied.

Hugh's grandmother looked up and down at Jimmy. He wore a white t-shirt, cuffed jeans and Doc Martens on his feet. Bovver boots, as they were called, were not a good indication of character; they were the shoes of misfits and troublemakers, stomping around town in gangs of boys dressed just like Jimmy. Hugh's grandmother was aware of this, and when Jimmy caught her staring at his feet, he knew Gary wouldn't be coming out to play.

"Just tell Gary I came round," Jimmy said and left.

"Did you see the bovver boots on that boy? No good, I'll tell you that," Helen said.

Hugh had never seen too many boys in the boots. From what he saw of them hiding behind the door, they didn't look too scary. Hugh saw the boy in the boots again the next day, moseying around the council estate.

"Didn't you come to my house yesterday?" Hugh asked.

"Yeah, I've played football with Gary a few times. I'm Jimmy Tombs. Tell Gary to bring you to the pitch by the uni tonight to play."

Before he had a chance to answer, another boy with a buzz cut bovver boots walked up.

"Jimmy, I've just seen those lads by your flat, again" the boy said.

Jimmy looked at Hugh. "What did you say your name was?"

"Hugh," he stuttered.

Jimmy turned back to the boy. "The same lads from the other week?"

"Yeah," the boy said, taking out a pack of Pal Mall's and offered one to Hugh.

Hugh had never been offered cigarette before. He was fairly sure he wouldn't like it, so he shook his head no.

"He's just a kid, don't give him that rubbish," Jimmy said. "You best be leaving, Hugh. See you tonight."

When Hugh got home, he told Gary about the encounter with Jimmy.

“You shouldn’t be hanging around with boys like Jimmy,” Gary said.

“Why not? He said you’ve played together.”

“Hardly. Trust me, Hugh. Anyways, you don’t even like football,” Gary said.

It was true, Hugh wasn’t much of a football player, but he was a fast runner decided to go play without Gary. The pitch was bumpy and not completely covered in grass. Hugh fared all right at the game, but nowhere near as good as Gary. When the group was walking back to the estate, Hugh jumped to the front to have a word with Jimmy.

“Hey, what happened to those boys you and your friend were talking about earlier?”

Hugh asked.

Jimmy pulled out a cigarette and shuffled around his pockets for a match.

“Don’t worry about them,” he said as the match set fire to the butt, “they’ll not be coming back again.”

“Why?” said Hugh.

“They’re not from the estate, they can’t just piss about where they like,” Jimmy answered.

“Were they doing anything bad?”

“They knew they don’t belong. That’s bad enough,” Jimmy said. “Heard you got quite a beating from Peter Lennin the other day?” Jimmy asked.

Peter Lennin. Hugh wasn’t sure if he was glad to know the name of his attacker or not. He ran his finger over the gash on his left arm. It was healing, but it still hurt if he touched it too hard. He was quiet long enough that Jimmy didn’t need an answer.

“Listen,” Jimmy began, “you can’t just exist here. If you’re going live in the estate, you have to be part of something. It’d be wise to think about your options. You’re just a wee little Jew, Brand, surely you’ll need some protection.”

“What do you mean?” Hugh said.

“There are lots of boys worse than Peter Lennin around here. Once more people find out that you’re a Jew and all...well. But if you’re in the Tombs, you don’t have to worry as much.”

“What are the Tombs?” Hugh asked.

“It’s the estate gang, Brandy boy. Every estate has one. I’m the head of ours, that’s why I’ve named it after myself.”

Hugh didn’t say anything back to Jimmy. He took the rest of the walk home to survey the pavement for weeds, distancing himself from the group. Once they entered the gates of the estate, all the mud covered boys split up into different directions, each entering a different building, passing by blue and purple gates.

“You’d be worse off without us,” Jimmy yelled to out to Hugh before he knocked off his bovver boots and headed inside his flat.

When Hugh was home, he went straight into the shower. He thought about Jimmy and Peter; maybe he wouldn’t have gotten a knife in his side if he knew Jimmy sooner. The water hit the cut and stung, not as badly as the first day, but enough to make Hugh wince.

Hugh got out, wrapped himself in a flannel pajama set and snuck into bed. Hugh wasn’t sure if Gary and Jimmy had talked about the Tombs, and if they had, why Gary never mentioned it. When he heard Gary stomp up the stairs, Hugh shut his eyes and pretended to be asleep. Gary came in, shut off the light and climbed into bed. Hugh rolled over so his back faced Gary’s bed. As he fell asleep, he imagined Peter Lennin straddling him again on the pavement, knife in hand,

and whether Jimmy Tombs had a knife as well. He wondered if everyone in the Tombs had a knife and if theirs were bigger than Peters. Hugh wasn't sure if he would ever want to have a knife, and even if he did, if he would use it. But Jimmy would tell him what was right or not. Knife or not. Hugh fell asleep easily and heavily, buzz cuts and bovver boots lingering in his mind.

As the school year continued, more and more kids from the council estate appeared to take the same bus to school as Hugh and Gary. It began as just a nod on the bus on the way to school, and progressed over time into morning chats and occasional walking home companions. None of the boys were in his class, but they all had recess at the same time.

School was just a place where Hugh swam in his own thoughts. He was never a top student in any subjects, mostly because he didn't care for his teachers. He would walk into school and hear them gossiping worse than the students they taught. Sometimes he would hear bits of their conversations, none of which made sense at first time.

"Did you see them Yid kids trying to play football outside?" one teacher said.

"Yeah, I saw one wearing his little Jew hat one day after school," another replied, laughing.

"Stupid Jew boys," the other said with a snort.

Instead, Hugh spent class time looking out at the rusty playground, surrounded by blacktop and a large, dreary field of grass. Hugh would dream about all the weeds he could identify and pluck from the ground instead of listening to his lessons. But in the midst of staring out the window during a religious studies lesson, a conversation caught his attention.

"Sir, is it true that the Jews killed Jesus?" asked one of his classmates.

Hugh's head turned away from the window to the front of the class, where his teacher stood facing the blackboard.

"Well," his teacher said, pivoting to face the class, "Yes." While he continued with a brief explanation of his answer, the boy turned around in his seat to face Hugh, along with four other classmates.

"You wait you Brand, you're dead," the boy said loud enough for the teacher to pretend to hear nothing.

Hugh was frozen in his seat. There was five of them, yes, five that had turned around. And when the class made their way outside for recess that day, it was five that backed him into a corner of the playground where nobody went with blades open at the ready.

"Wait," Hugh pleaded, but he thought of nothing to bargain with. He could try to run, but he was afraid that one of the five could easily bring him down. The teachers were on the other side of the playground, and probably wouldn't have done much even if they'd seen it with their own eyes. So Hugh crouched down and tried to pray.

When no one had a hand on him yet, he looked up. Some of the boys from the council estate were standing around him. There were only three of them, but that helped Hugh's odds enough.

"Now, you lads weren't trying to corner Brand here?" said Tom, a boy from the estate.

"He killed gentle Jesus, he has," one of Hugh's classmates said with a little jab at Hugh.

The boys from the estate quickly took down the schoolboys, while Hugh watched from a bit of a ways away, crouched behind an old rust slide. He almost thought to join them, but he knew they were probably better without him. Everyone knew he wasn't much of a fighter.

When it was all over, Tom walked toward Hugh, whipping some snot with his coat sleeve and spitting on the ground.

“Here,” he said and handed Hugh his switchblade, “for next time.”

Hugh hesitated, but took the knife. He stuck it in between the waistband of his trousers and his underpants, fearful that it would somehow cut through his pocket. Hugh couldn’t afford another tear in his clothes.

Hugh walked home with the boys that day and he felt safe. They mostly talked about football, but Hugh pulled out a few smiles and nodded a lot. Hugh imagined they would split off once they arrived at the estate, but instead, Tom invited him to play football.

“You’d be better off playing with my brother,” Hugh said shyly.

“He can come too,” Tom said.

Hugh ran up and down the pitch, amazed that he was faster than most of the boys, even Gary. But when he caught a glimpse of weed sprouting from the middle of the pitch, he stopped to bend over and have a look. Forgetting about the match completely, a boy soon came tumbling over him and landed on the ground with a thud.

“I’m so sorry,” Hugh said. “It was an accident.”

“That’s rubbish,” the boy said and pulled Hugh to the ground. The boy was smaller than Hugh, which was pretty incredible. The boys rolled around for a bit, kicking and slapping each other.

“Quit it, Hugh!” Gary said.

“They’re fine, mate. Let them work it out,” Jimmy said.

“My brother’s not a fighter.”

“He is now,” Jimmy said.

After more rolling and scratching, all the boys on the pitch were laughing, except for Gary. He shot a mean look at Jimmy.

“Alright, that’s enough lads,” Jimmy said.

Hugh stood up and brushed the dirt off of his clothes.

“What was that?” Gary asked.

“I don’t know. But I think I won.”

“We’re going home. Come on,” Gary said, pulling Hugh’s arm.

“I want to stay,” Hugh groaned.

“Not with these boys,” Gary said.

Gary dragged Hugh back to the flat. Neither said a word on the walk. Hugh replayed the fight in his mind. He felt like smiling, even though knew he shouldn’t be proud. Still, he felt something.

Hugh held onto the knife Tom had given him for emergencies. He covertly wore it to school everyday, but still hadn’t ever used it. On his walk home from school one day, Hugh took the knife out from his belt and flipped it open. The blade itself was longer than the length of Hugh’s hand, and it didn’t feel comfortable in his grasp. But on an island of cement in the parking lot, Hugh spotted a thick patch of common ragwort. He approached the tall feathery leaves to find it hadn’t produced any flowers yet. With the knife already in his hand, Hugh found no reason not to be the one to get rid of the nuisance himself. He grabbed the midsection of the plant and sawed off the part nearest to the ground. He took it in his hand and threw it out to the lot, not interested in saving it for any collection.

The most use he'd gotten out of a knife before then was cutting the *challah* on Friday nights when his mother let him. But the more he held onto it, the more he began tucking it into his waistband when he got dressed for school. Gary caught a glimpse of it one morning.

"What's that you have there?" Gary said, and tried to lift up Hugh's jumper.

"Nothing!" Hugh said shoving him off.

Gary landed on his cot and hit his head against the wall. Hugh stood wide-eyed; he had never so much as slapped Gary's hand away when he tried to finish his leftovers at supper.

"What's gotten into you, mate?" Gary said, inching closer to Hugh.

"I said nothing!" and Hugh stormed out of the room. He grabbed his rucksack and the house without breakfast or Gary. He met up with the boys from the Tombs at the bus stop and jumped around the bus with them until the driver yelled at them, at which they all laughed, even Hugh.

This became the trend for Hugh; grabbing a piece of bread on his way out of the house, ignoring the porridge and milk his mother would lay out for him on the occasional mornings she was home. The highlight of Hugh's day was causing a riot on the bus to and from school. Sometimes the bus driver would get so fed he'd throw them out on the street before they got to their stop. Boys would offer him cigarettes on their walks, and he began to accept them with pride. On their way back to the estate, a few blocks further than they usually were, Hugh and the boys ran into Jimmy and some of the older members on their way home from school. They all began walking together, taking the mick out of each other until Jimmy stopped and pointed across the street. It was Peter Lennin, and he was alone.

"Look here Brand, it's your friend Peter. Let's go say hello," Peter said with a grin.

Hugh hadn't seen Peter since the stabbing. Although Hugh had grown a few centimeters since their last meeting, Peter seemed to gain half a head on him. But Hugh felt the knife in his waistband and Jimmy's words in his ears, and ran across the street.

"Hey!" Hugh yelled, trying to make his voice lower.

"What do you want, Brand?" Peter replied, dropping his rucksack to the ground.

Hugh looked back across the street to the boys for encouragement.

"Get him, Hugh!"

"Come on now, Brandy!"

But Hugh just stood there, fingering the knife on his side.

Peter laughed and picked up his bag, "You can run back to your Jewish bastard Mummy now, Brand."

Hugh whipped out the knife and held it shakily to Peter's chest. Jimmy and a few of the other boys ran across the street and held Peter's arms behind his back.

Peter tilted his head down to have a look at the knife. Jimmy grabbed him by the hair and arched his head backwards.

"Go for it!"

"You've got him!"

"Go ahead now, Hugh," Jimmy said.

The look on Jimmy's face was proud, like Hugh was his son and he was watching him turn into a man. The boys on the pavement across the street and the ones holding Peter upright all cheered for Hugh as if they were at a football match and someone had just scored a goal. But this was not a match. It was real. Hugh felt the knife in his hand and became numb. The knife dropped to the ground.

“What’re you doing, Brand?” Peter said, as he picked the knife up from the ground and tried to hand it to him.

“I’m not bad,” Hugh muttered and walked away.

Hugh could hear the boys shouting behind him, first apologetic and then mean, critical. But the cars driving by drowned out their screams and soon he couldn’t hear them at all.

When Hugh got home, everyone, including his mother, was sitting down for Shabbat dinner. He’d almost forgotten it was Friday.

“Are you going to join us?” Gloria asked him.

“He’s probably going back out with Jimmy and them,” Gary said.

Hugh didn’t say a word but sat down at the table, ashtray adjacent. They said the prayer over the bread, but Hugh remained quiet still.

“Do you want to cut the *challah*, Hugh?” Gloria asked, handing him the knife.

“No,” Hugh replied.

Gary took the knife instead and started slicing the bread, pouring salt on each piece and handing them out. Hugh ate his bread and soup, leaving not even one drop for Gary to come and slurp clean. After he’d finished, he excused himself to bed. He dragged his feet up to the top of the stairs and collapsed into bed without changing into his pajamas.

The following Monday, Gary woke Hugh up for school.

“Mum’s here if you care to have breakfast,” Gary said as he buttoned his school shirt.

Hugh couldn’t jump out of bed, but he was happy she was home. He slowly put on on his robe and followed Gary down the stairs to the kitchen.

“Hot porridge and milk boys,” Gloria said and took a puff of her menthol.

“Thanks, Mum,” the boys said in unison.

Hugh finished his porridge even quicker than Gary did.

“You’re enjoying that, aren’t you?” Gloria said, chuckling to herself.

Once Hugh was dressed, he returned downstairs to find Gary waiting at the door for him with his rucksack and an umbrella.

“Thought you might need a brolly, it’s supposed to rain today,” Gary said to Hugh, holding the umbrella out for him.

“Thanks,” Hugh said, put it into his pack.

Gary opened the door and two walked to the bus stop together. They didn’t talk or hold hands, but that was still ok.

Hugh laid low in the estate for a few months, traveling to fields far from the neighborhood to inspect new species of weeds. There were so many he’d never seen before that he decided to begin recording them in a journal. By the summer holiday, Hugh was quite sure no one remembered him, and he started to hang around with Gary and a few West Indian neighbors on the estate. Hugh found some boys in class that he wasn’t particularly fond of, but they were nice and didn’t care too much about football, which was a bit of a relief for Hugh. For a long time, this was enough for Hugh.

Hugh was 19 and still living in the estate with his mum and grandmother. Gary had gone off to London to be an accountant, and Hugh was doing a course at the local college. He’d gotten much bigger, and incredibly strong in his teenage years, and decided to take up a martial arts class. On the first day he arrived to see a familiar face, one he couldn’t quite forget even when he tried. He approached the man, who was now not much taller than himself.

“Hey Peter,” Hugh said sticking out his hand.

“Is that you, Brand?” Peter asked, shaking it respectfully. “You’ve gotten a wee bit bigger, haven’t you. What are you doing in a class like this?”

“Why not,” Hugh responded.

“Well, you always a good kick, I remember, but you’re missing something, Brand.”

“What?” Hugh asked.

“A killer instinct.”

The class began and the teacher instructed everyone to get into pairs. Hugh and Peter teamed up, for the sake of old times. They went through a succession of moves, and then they were allowed to fight.

“Good luck, mate,” Peter said to Hugh, getting in the beginning stance.

Hugh knew he was a good fighter, and really could be better than he already was. But none of that bothered him. Peter was already good at what he did and that was great, but Hugh had control. He could control what he did.

“Right, let’s go,” said the teacher.

And then the fight began.

Bump

But I felt them,
where the stones had landed
plop
on his head,
in his youth,
me in mine.
Walking home from school,
raining rocks,
hail,
marking his surface,
invisible to most,
the bulging bump.
My fingers crawled across,
right up to the forehead
it was there
I touched it.
I wanted to deflate it.
The boys that created it
British boys were mean,
he made them mean
he was being Jewish
so they gave him a Yiddish bump.
Friday night, strange blessings,
funny hats,
bump.
No football or pints,
bump.
An England he didn't want
and made his England mine.

Knocking

We fight on knocking.

I am a child, why me.
That's what children do.
Picking up your dirt.
Who ever let me wear white?

Shouldn't you know white
doesn't last, I do.
I am a grown up with you,
But not every day
No one says to be.

No one says be a child.
Hugh was a child,
When this door was new.
He walked in with cuts and bumps,
fresh, raw, silenced. This
house knows secrets, the
ones I know too, just me, not
dad, nana. Secrets
grew beyond that door.

I can see the door through the
windshield. You unload
the trunk, frustrated.
But we *are* going inside,
you have to know that.

I take your old dirt,
today, I'll be the grown up,
I do your knocking.